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THE DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE
WASHINGTON, D. C. 20505

7 May 1975

MEMORANDUM FOR: The Honorable Henry A. Kissinger
Assistant to the President
(National Security Affairs)

SUBJECT : Intelligence Alert Memorandum:
Possible Rapid Unravelling of
the Coalition Government in Laos

1. As the attached roundup indicates, there is a distinct possibility that the coalition government in Laos will come unstuck in the very near future, with a resultant consolidation of political power under the Pathet Lao. Laos being Laos, this might not happen for several weeks, or even months, but it could happen within the next few days.

2. We do not believe the non-Communist elements of the present coalition will be collapsed or driven out by military action alone, and the current level of military action is not sufficient to produce this result. The fighting around Sala Phou Khoun and the apparent advance of Pathet Lao forces along Route 13 does not, of itself, pose a physical threat to the coalition structure, but it does add a further element of political pressure at a time when the coalition structure is already shaky.

3. The "Vientiane Side" of the coalition is so dispirited by Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma's recent yielding to the Pathet Lao, by the manifest ability of the Pathet Lao steadily to strengthen their position within the government apparatus, and by the recent successes of Communist power in South Vietnam and Cambodia, that the coalition could fall by default. As we have previously reported, a number of non-Communist ministers in the coalition are seriously considering resigning and leaving the country.

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4. The Intelligence Community is watching this situation carefully. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] We caution, however, that facts in Laos are hard to come by, our coverage of Laotian developments is far less thorough than was the case before 1973, and despite our best efforts, we could find ourselves confronted -- literally overnight -- with a markedly changed situation in Vientiane.

5. This memorandum has been discussed with offices in CIA, DIA, State/INR and NSA, and they are in agreement.

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[REDACTED]
for William F. Colby
Director

Attachment

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Memorandum

Laos: Coalition in Jeopardy

1. Recent Communist victories in South Vietnam and Cambodia have had a devastating emotional and psychological impact on the non-Communist leadership in Laos. These events have reinforced the non-Communists' belief that a Pathet Lao "victory" is inevitable, and that it is futile to resist Lao Communist advances on either the political or the military front. This defeatist attitude could lead to a rapid unravelling of the 13-month-old coalition government and the passage of political power to the Pathet Lao by default.

2. Senior non-Communist political and military leaders are convinced that the Pathet Lao, emboldened by Communist battlefield successes elsewhere in Indochina and encouraged by Hanoi, have adopted a much more aggressive posture in Laos. They point to the recent Pathet Lao cease-fire violations in the Sala Phou Khoun area of northern Laos as clear evidence of increased militancy. On the political front, they cite intensified Pathet Lao efforts to whip up popular support -- most recently manifested by the large-scale May Day demonstrations in Vientiane -- for the ouster of key rightist and other non-Communist leaders who oppose Communist objectives. They also point to ongoing Pathet Lao efforts to foment unrest in non-Communist-controlled urban areas.

3. A growing number of prominent and influential non-Communist cabinet ministers and general officers have been seriously intimidated by these Pathet Lao-inspired demonstrations and, to an even greater extent, by rumors that Lao Communist headquarters in Sam Neua has ordered the "elimination" of key rightist leaders. The assassination in Vientiane on Monday of several rightists, including a former minister who was a close relative of Defense Minister Sisouk and Prince

Boun Oum na Champassak -- both prominent southern rightist power-brokers -- has greatly exacerbated these fears. There is no evidence that the Pathet Lao actually perpetrated the killings, but in Vientiane they are widely believed to have done so and this belief -- right or wrong -- has given the killings their political impact.

4. Many leading non-Communist coalition officials and military leaders, including General Vang Pao, are seriously considering resigning from office, and perhaps leaving the country altogether. They have lost all confidence in Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma and believe he has sold out their interests to the Pathet Lao. Souvanna, in turn, has requested the resignation of General Kouprasith and several other high ranking Vientiane officers, and ordered the firing of Vang Pao and the Vientiane region military commander. (These orders have not yet been carried out.) Souvanna has also ordered that there be no resistance to Pathet Lao military action.

5. Perhaps most important, the non-Communists are firmly convinced that they cannot depend on the US to preserve the coalition's stability and Lao neutrality. As "proof," non-Communist leaders cite the refusal of the American Congress to provide emergency assistance to the Saigon and Phnom Penh governments in their moment of greatest need.

The Lao Communists

6. While the current military action at Sala Phou Khoun and along Route 13 represents the most serious and sustained cease-fire violation since the February 1973 military standdown went into effect, there is no hard evidence that either the Pathet Lao or their North Vietnamese backers have consciously decided to scuttle the coalition by military force. Indeed, a case can be made that the Communists are satisfied with trends in Laos, which they see as moving inexorably in their favor.

- Communist Deputy Prime Minister Phoumi Vongvichit recently assured the Lao diplomatic corps that, while military incidents such as the fighting at Sala Phou Khoun were inevitable, war would not be resumed in Laos.
- In Western eyes, at least, it would appear to make little sense for the Pathet Lao to have taken the unprecedented step of inviting King Savang to spend the last week in Sam Neua if they were on the verge of launching a major attack.
- The Pathet Lao have maintained a firm hold on the political initiative since the coalition was formed, and virtually all of their major policy proposals -- including dissolution of the rightist-dominated National Assembly -- have been adopted.
- In Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma, the Communists have a coalition leader who, for a variety of reasons, has yielded to their views on most of the important issues decided by the new government.

7. Nonetheless, the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese have almost certainly been encouraged by Communist successes elsewhere in Indochina. Given the demoralization and disarray among the non-Communists, the Communists may consider that the time is now ripe to press rapidly for total control. In the most recent fighting, the non-Communist forces have been ordered to offer no resistance and are also plagued by weak leadership and poor morale.

External Influences

8. It remains true that Sam Neua marches to Hanoi's drum, but there is no evidence as to whether or not the North Vietnamese are presently counseling their Pathet Lao clients to move in the direction of

a military takeover in Laos. The Communist troops engaged in the most recent fighting have reportedly been mixed Pathet Lao-North Vietnamese units, but there is no confirmation of this.

9. Over the past two years, Hanoi has withdrawn some 58,000 troops from Laos. Approximately 22,000 North Vietnamese troops -- 10,000 combat and 12,000 logistic personnel -- still remain, and would be readily available for action if Hanoi eventually decided to support renewed warfare by the Pathet Lao. Given the poor morale and combat ineffectiveness of non-Communist forces, the Pathet Lao would probably need little if any support from Hanoi if they chose to force a military solution.

10. The Chinese also have expressed steadfast support for Prime Minister Souvanna's coalition, and, like the North Vietnamese, have substantially reduced their own force levels in Laos. The force of about 30,000 Chinese noted in Laos at the time of the 1973 cease-fire probably has been reduced by nearly half. Peking, clearly suspicious of Hanoi's intentions to extend its hegemony over all of Indochina, would almost certainly counsel the Pathet Lao not to renew offensive action in Laos.

11. The Soviet Union wants to have a continuing role in Laos -- if only to frustrate China. The Soviets have reaffirmed strong support for the Lao coalition in the wake of Communist victories in South Vietnam and Cambodia. A Soviet diplomat in Vientiane recently expressed Moscow's deep concern over the flareup of fighting in northern Laos and indicated that his government was anxious to preserve the present coalition. More recently, however, Soviet and Polish diplomats in Vientiane have expressed the view that the Pathet Lao have decided to move now to bring about Communist domination of Laos, and that this will occur within 30 to 60 days.

12. In light of what is now happening in Laos, we believe that this estimate of Soviet and Polish diplomats is reasonable (and may indeed be overly optimistic). Should the immediate crisis pass, however, the trend will clearly remain in the direction of an early Pathet Lao takeover of the government.